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Tomkins, Calvin

To the Honorable the Board of Estimate...

[New York]

[1903]

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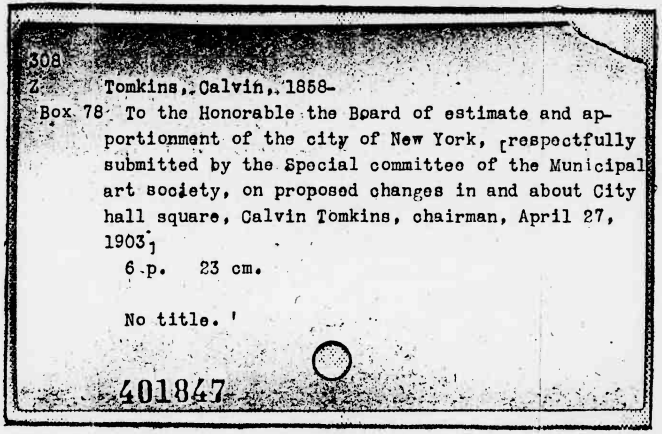
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Tomkins, Calvin, 1858-
Box 78 To the Honorable the Board of estimate and apportionment of the city of New York, [respectfully submitted by the Special committee of the Municipal art society, on proposed changes in and about City hall square, Calvin Tomkins, chairman, April 27, 1903]
6 p. 23 cm.
No title.
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TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

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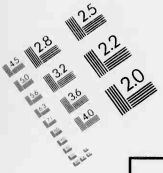

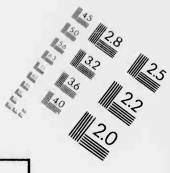

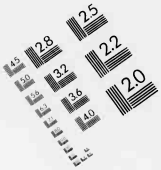

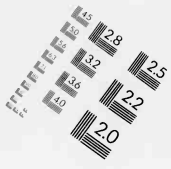

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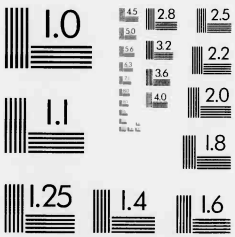

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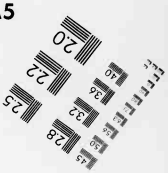

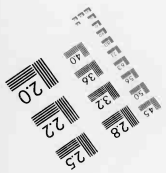

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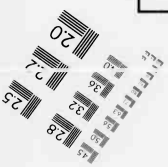

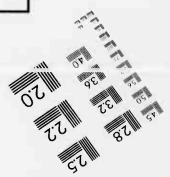

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New York, April 27, 1903.

To the Honorable the Board of Estimate
and Apportionment of The City of New York:

GENTLEMEN—In September last the Municipal Art Society submitted a memorial to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment relative to proposed changes in and about City Hall Square. Several suggestions were made, but the essential idea, which included all others, was stated as follows:

"Assuming that the property bounded by North William street, Park Row, Chambers street and Centre street is to be taken for bridge approaches, then this Committee distinctly advises that that property situated between Chambers and Reade streets, extending from the new Hall of Records to Broadway, be also condemned. The offices now located in the existing buildings on this site can be immediately utilized for municipal purposes at a distinct saving in rental to the City. In the Stewart Building alone the City is at present paying $142,360 for but a few rooms on three floors. If this is done at once, the realty will be secured at the lowest possible figure, and in the future arrangements can be made for the planning and construction of municipal buildings for the site on Chambers street adjacent to Broadway and the site adjacent to the bridge, of dimensions which shall dominate the locality and which shall most economically and liberally provide office accommodations for the City's use for many years to come. The same considerations which are leading the great financial institutions to buy and build in the lower part of the city should influence the actions of public officials having the permanent interests of the City at heart."

The Mayor, at a recent meeting of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, proposed that the City should acquire the land bounded by Park Row, North William street, Duane street and Centre street, and moved that the Commissioner of Bridges be instructed to prepare and submit to the Board plans for the utilization of such area. In his argument favoring

a combined transit-terminal, and municipal building on this land, the Mayor also argues against the plan of the Municipal Art Society for the acquisition by the City of the Broadway and Chambers street site. Since the acquisition of the above plot by the City constitutes the vital part of the Society's recommendations. Your Committee cannot well avoid the necessity of replying to the criticism of his Honor the Mayor, and take this opportunity of again briefly referring to the matter.

The arguments advanced by the Mayor for acquiring the site adjacent to the Bridge and against acquiring the site on Chambers street, adjacent to the Park, may be stated as follows:

FIRST—Greater convenience of access of the Bridge site.

SECOND—The co-operation of the railroads will lessen the expense to the City.

THIRD—The much greater expense attending the acquisition and development of the Park site.

He summarizes as follows:

"I apprehend that the plan I have suggested with all its incidental advantages on the side of improving traffic conditions and with a greater amount of office accommodation, can be carried out for a less sum than it would cost to condemn the Chambers street property, without regard to any buildings to be erected upon that (site)."

Replying to the argument of convenience your Committee would state that at the present time offices on Chambers street near Broadway are considered more desirable and rent for higher figures than offices in the vicinity of the Bridge, east of Centre street; and do so in spite of the influence of existing surface and elevated railroads. The added operation of the subway may make some difference in this respect, but we respectfully submit that no possible change in the City's transit system is likely to equalize the merits of offices located on Park Row, Centre and Duane streets, and those located on Broadway and Chambers streets; further, while a building located near the Bridge would be convenient of access for passengers from the east side and the Bridge, it would be decidedly inconvenient for west side, Broadway, South Brooklyn and Staten Island passengers. The fact that offices located in this vicinity are not relatively desirable now seems to us a

sound reason for thinking that they will not be relatively more desirable in the future. Private enterprise does not erect modern office buildings on cheap and undesirable land; why should the City follow a different policy?

As regards the co-operation of the railroads, it is undoubtedly true, as the Mayor states, that they would be willing to contribute a reasonable rental should the City buy for their convenience, and he adds: "It is a common report that both the New York Central and Pennsylvania Railroads are proposing to use the space above *their* new stations." The land in question is undeniably necessary for a Union Terminal Station. The railroads must have the use of it. If the City is able to buy it and rent it to them on a profitable basis, it would appear to us most desirable this should be accomplished; if, however, the City, by so doing, should be prevented as a result of consequent financial disability from acquiring the most advantageous site for its needed municipal buildings, then the permanent good of the community would be subverted to the temporary convenience of the railroads—for the railroads can buy for their own account, as the New York Central and Pennsylvania have already done.

Regarding comparative expense in the choice of sites, the Mayor estimates that the Chambers street site would cost eight to ten million dollars: He adds "I apprehend no one would favor the purchase of such costly land unless it were to be developed with monumental buildings." Your Committee believed that the value placed on this plot is far beyond the price the City would be obliged to pay. The fact that it is now occupied by buildings most of which, though not new, are in good order and which are at present used by many of the most important departments of the City's government, makes it peculiarly advantageous for the City to take it over. The Stewart Building, the American News Company Building and the Emigrant Savings Bank Building take up most of the ground and can readily be arranged for immediate occupancy: The remaining buildings can be at least temporarily adapted by the City to secondary uses. As a result of ousting private tenants most, if not all, of the City Departments could be located here to the great advantage of the City in economy of rents. By following such a plan it would not be necessary for the City to incur *any* immediate outlay for the construction of

new buildings; this matter could go over until such time as the City had the necessary funds to spare when the work could be proceeded with progressively, beginning at the Hall of Records and extending by degrees westward toward Broadway; in other words the Municipality would purchase the most desirable plot for the development of its civic centre and could intelligently, because leisurely, and as a matter of adaptability, arrange for efficient and artistic treatment of the problem. Ultimately City Hall Park would be cleared of obstructing structures, and, in the meantime, much needed room would be made immediately available for the occupancy of the various departments.

It would seem to your Committee that the argument of relative expense must of necessity be modified by recent legislation at Albany, giving the Mayor power to appoint a commission of five to decide upon the site for a new court-house, south of Franklin street "and within City Hall Park if thought wise." It is of course out of the question to seriously consider the utilization of the Park for this purpose. The location of the courts over the hurly-burly of a terminal station also seems out of the question as detracting from the dignity which should hedge them. The Federal Courts are located in the U. S. Post-office. The Hall of Records is located on Chambers street, and it would seem to your Committee that no more desirable location for a new court-house can be found than proximity to the headquarters of the City Government and at the same time accessibility to the Federal Courts and the Hall of Records. If a new court-house must be built, why not locate it near where the business of the courts is now being transacted. The necessity for such a structure on Chambers street of course facilitates the purchase by the City of the remaining property in that vicinity.

It would hardly seem necessary to emphasize the advisability of planning the City's important new buildings with relation to the Old City Hall—the one civic building in which New Yorkers can take artistic pride—therefore the suggestion of buildings to the north and axil with the City Hall is distinctly to be preferred to any location at one side of such axis. The fact that Washington, Cleveland, Buffalo, San Francisco and many other cities are at this time earnestly studying and carefully considering the possible grouping of their public

buildings, so as to form a comprehensive unit, would indicate the advisability of New York not overlooking the same potential advantage.

Even at the Mayor's estimate of cost of purchase, it appears to your Committee of vital importance to the City's welfare that this land should be taken. We are fully convinced that ultimately the City *must take it over*, and it certainly will never be cheaper than it is now. Proximity to the civic centre will promptly result in its improvement and greatly enhance value, and this makes it imperative that the City should act without delay in taking advantage of the favorable opportunity which exists for obtaining it, and by so doing reserve for its own benefit the unearned increment which it will otherwise pay for later on as the price of lack of public spirit and sound judgment now.

In closing, we wish to say that while we have not been able to avoid placing our friendly criticism alongside the friendly criticism of the Mayor directed against the plan of this Society, we are nevertheless convinced that he is actuated by the same consideration for the City's welfare which actuates the members and Committees of the Municipal Art Society. We are also alive to the fact that while there is little responsibility on our shoulders for the expenditure of the City's great but inadequate annual fund, he on the contrary is directly responsible to the people for all expenditures and that as a consequence he must be continually eliminating merely desirable improvements from among those absolutely necessary to the immediate welfare and future development of the City.

Bearing in mind, however, the probable future growth and dimensions of the City of New York, your Committee believe that no plan should be adopted which does not admit of grand opportunities for development at the City Hall, and in this connection we are firmly convinced that the land on Chambers street, extending to Reade street, between Broadway and the Hall of Records, is absolutely necessary to the success of such a project. Neither do we believe that our plan in any way antagonizes the admirable plan of the Mayor for facilitating travel at the Bridge entrance: Providing the erection of municipal buildings on both sides shall be deferred to a more opportune time, the City may reasonably be expected to take over both sites now; if, however, the financial condition of the

City is such as to make this inexpedient, then let the street railroads do as the Trunk Lines have already done—purchase for themselves, land they need, and by so doing, leave the City free to provide the best site for its capitol.

Respectfully submitted

Special Committee of the Municipal Art Society on proposed changes in and about City Hall Square.

CALVIN TOMKINS,
Chairman.

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